

Noah Beck: Is World War III on the Horizon?

Americans are the biggest losers from the slew of scandals now rocking the White House, but who are the biggest winners? Iran, North Korea, Syria, China and Russia. If U.S. foreign policy seemed spineless and muddled in confronting bad actors before the Benghazi-IRS-AP scandals surfaced, the U.S. just became that much more irrelevant to its archrivals and antagonists on the world stage.

Unfortunately, the trio of scandals comes at an extremely dangerous time. The ever-unpredictable North Korea just fired three short-range guided missiles. Much more ominously, Russia is reverting to a Cold War mindset in ways far more serious than the recent arrest of alleged CIA operative Ryan Fogle. Russia is doubling down on its strategy of backing its Syrian client, and the stakes couldn't be higher.

Russia recently sold advanced Yakhont anti-ship cruise missiles to Syrian President Bashar Assad. These missiles, outfitted with an advanced guidance system, effectively empower Syria to thwart any attempt by international forces to help Syrian rebels with a naval embargo or no-fly zone.

Upping the ante even more, Russia sent at least a dozen warships to its Tartus naval base in Syria, according to a *Wall Street Journal* report last Thursday. Russia also has declared its intention to complete its sale of the S-300 advanced anti-aircraft missile system to Syria.

The S-300 is a state-of-the-art system that can intercept fighter jets and cruise missiles at a range of about 124 miles and would therefore—if actually delivered to Assad—represent a game-changer that disturbs the current military balance of power in the Middle East. That is undoubtedly a red line for

Israel—and Israel takes its red lines seriously, as it has shown with airstrikes on Syrian targets to prevent the transfer of sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah.

When the above developments are combined with the already combustible circumstances prevailing in the Middle East, the results could quickly explode into a potentially catastrophic regional conflict. The potential belligerents—Israel on the one hand, and the Syrian-Iranian-Hezbollah axis on the other—have decades of hostility and mistrust between them and no open communications by which to resolve conflicts or clarify intentions. Thus, the possibility of miscalculation is dangerously high, and the short distance between Syria and Israel only accelerates the time to full-scale war.

The Golan Heights, which borders Israel, Lebanon and Jordan, is the only buffer between Israel and Syria, and it is only about 500 square miles large. Israel's 2006 war with Lebanon, which is effectively as close as Syria is, illustrates how easily and quickly one miscalculation or attack can unexpectedly lead to something far greater. On July 16, 2006, Hezbollah terrorists fired rockets at Israeli border towns and ambushed two armored Humvees patrolling the Israeli side of the border fence, killing three Israeli soldiers.

Hezbollah launched the totally unprovoked attack with the limited goal of abducting some Israeli soldiers, but that offensive sparked a monthlong war with Israel that left over a thousand dead, displaced well over a million and resulted in billions of dollars of economic damage. Without the cooperation of world powers, the conflict might have escalated into something considerably worse.

But with the two-year-old conflict in Syria and the current confluence of events, the situation is much more perilous. In Syria, there are chemical weapons and the unabashed involvement of an ex-super-power (Russia), one of the world's most dangerous terrorist organizations (Iran-backed Hezbollah)

and a rogue nation that sponsors global terrorism and is aggressively pursuing a nuclear capability (Iran). Obama's isolationist stance paved the way for an increasingly jihadist Sunni insurgency to fill the resulting vacuum in Syria, and his policy has allowed Russian designs and influence in the region to go unchecked, however disastrous the results may be.

Since the start of the Syrian conflict, Russia has sniffed Obama's lack of resolve. But now, with so many domestic scandals plaguing Obama, Russia is even more emboldened to pursue its interests in Syria, and that sets the stage for an inflammable conflict. Israelis know all too well that when it comes to their security, they can ultimately rely only on themselves. Indeed, no foreign soldier has ever died defending Israel in any of the major wars threatening its existence.

So if Russia ultimately delivers the S-300 missiles, New Jersey-sized Israel may be forced to destroy those batteries before they become fully operational, or even after, if its legendary air force can find ways to overcome the system. But such attacks by Israel would quickly draw in Hezbollah and Iran, vastly expanding the theater of conflict in a way that could have devastating and far-reaching consequences.

Will Iran decide at some point to attack U.S. interests across the Middle East and/or Europe with its ballistic missiles or terrorist sleeper cells? Will Iran block the Strait of Hormuz and send oil prices skyrocketing, challenging NATO military resolve to open the critical waterway by force? Will Israel decide to strike at Iran's nuclear program?

Much potential peril lies ahead. Will the United States' commander in chief be so distracted by three scandals that he can't effectively respond to, much less proactively manage, the international crises that may soon emerge? Is that how World War III happens during Obama's second term?

Noah Beck is the author of *The Last Israelis*, a doomsday thriller about the Iranian nuclear threat and current geopolitical issues in the Middle East.